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PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1994-1995

Review of travel and related entitlements for members of organs and subsidiary organs and staff members of the United Nations

Standards of accommodation for air travel

Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Advisory Committee has considered three reports of the Secretary-General: the review of travel and related entitlements for staff members of the United Nations (A/C.5/48/83), the review of travel and related entitlements for members of organs and subsidiary organs and staff members of the United Nations (A/C.5/48/14); and the standards of accommodation for air travel (A/C.5/48/3). In the course of the Committee's deliberations, the representatives of the Secretary-General provided additional information to the Committee.

II. REVIEW OF TRAVEL AND RELATED ENTITLEMENTS FOR STAFF MEMBERS OF THE UNITED NATIONS

2. In paragraphs 1 to 4 of his report contained in document A/C.5/48/83, the Secretary-General provides background information on the issue of travel and related entitlements for staff members of the United Nations; as stated therein, the Secretary-General submitted to the General Assembly at its forty-seventh session a report (A/C.5/47/61) that dealt with travel and related entitlements

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for members of organs and subsidiary organs. The Secretary-General stated in the report that efforts were under way to have the issue of travel standards of staff members considered on an inter-agency basis by placing it on the agenda ofthe Consultative Committee on Administrative Questions (CCAQ), and that he therefore considered it advisable to postpone to the forty-eighth session of the Assembly the submission of recommendations with regard to travel of staff members. By its decision 47/460, the General Assembly agreed with the proposal of the Secretary-General. In addition to its earlier requests, the General Assembly, in its resolution 48/228 requested the Secretary-General to submit proposals during the forty-eighth session on the provision of and related arrangements for travel services and allowances, with a view to making more effective use of resources, taking into account the practices of Member States.

3. In section I, paragraphs 5 to 10, of his report (A/C.5/48/83), the Secretary-General outlines the current provisions and rules governing the standard of accommodation for air travel by staff members of the United Nations. The Committee notes from paragraphs 7, 8 and 9 of the report that, while the basic standard of accommodation for air travel is economy class at the least costly airfare structure regularly available, higher standards may apply depending upon the rank of the traveller, the duration of the trip and the purpose of the travel. Under-secretaries-general and assistant secretaries-general and, where applicable, their eligible family members are provided with travel accommodation "in class immediately below first class for travel on official business, on appointment, transfer or separation, for home-leave and family-visit travel, irrespective of the duration of a particular flight". Staff members below the assistant secretary-general level are provided with transportation "at the least costly airfare structure regularly available or its equivalent" and only for flights exceeding a duration of nine hours is accommodation provided "in the class immediately below first class for travel on official business". The Committee believes that the nine-hour threshold should be reviewed by the Secretary-General in the light of all relevant factors and the results of the review, together with the related proposals, should be included in the next report of the Secretary-General on the standards of travel.

4. The Committee points out that, while the formula "the least costly airfare structure regularly available or its equivalent" seems to provide rather objective criteria for determining the standards of accommodation for air travel, the definition "the class immediately below first class" leaves, in the view of the Committee, too much room for interpretation as to what exactly the standard of air travel might be, especially considering the diversity in travel standards offered by various carriers. The Committee recommends, therefore, that the Secretary-General look into this matter with a view to identifying a more objective criteria for determining the standards of accommodation for air travel instead of the currently used "the class immediately below first class".

5. In response to inquiry, the Committee was informed that, since 1982, the contract for travel agency services at Headquarters (including the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Children's Fund) has been open to competitive bidding on three occasions. Most recently, in 1993, the Organization retained the services of a well-known travel consultant to draft a request for proposal, which contained stringent requirements concerning measurable performance standards and required that offers included a proposed

budget for the travel agency to permit a better understanding of the financial considerations with a view to maximizing the monetary gain for the Organization. As a result of the bidding exercise, the contract for travel agency services was awarded to American Express. The Secretariat has negotiated volume cash rebate arrangements with approximately 23 air carriers with which the Organization uses a high volume of service for official travel. In addition, negotiations have also been concluded with carriers for group travel to missions, conferences, etc.

6. Nevertheless, the Advisory Committee is of the view that there is scope for further improvements in the management of travel. The Advisory Committee trusts that the Secretary-General will consider application of various innovative techniques of dealing with air carriers, such as "pare-fare", with a view to improving the cost-effectiveness of travel arrangements.

7. The Advisory Committee recalls that, in its resolution 49/216 of 23 December 1994, the General Assembly endorsed the recommendations contained in the report of the Board of Auditors 1/ and requested the Secretary-General to continue to monitor closely the costs and benefits to the Organization of the lump-sum arrangements, including an analysis of the level of cash incentive provided to staff by the current 75 per cent procedure, and to make any necessary adjustment to ensure that the arrangements do not offer scope for abuse. The Advisory Committee recalls that in accordance with information circular ST/IC/1990/13 of 19 March 1990, staff members were authorized to choose an option to make their own travel arrangements and receive a lump-sum payment equivalent to 75 per cent of the cost of the full economy class fare by the least costly scheduled air carrier in lieu of the applicable travel and related entitlements on home leave, education grant and family visit travel.

8. In response to inquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, in accordance with circular ST/IC/1900/13/Amend.4 of 5 January 1995, the lump-sum option for home leave, family visit and education grant travel was extended to all such travel commencing prior to 31 December 1995. In addition, the review panel on the lump sum option (composed of representatives from various areas of the Secretariat) recommended revised record-keeping procedures with a view to collecting further data in a uniform standard. Any decision on the future of the option to be made at the end of 1995 will be based on the results of the analysis of the data collected at Headquarters and the various overseas offices. The Advisory Committee intends to follow up closely on the lump-sum option based on the information to be provided by the Secretary-General on the results of the review prior to the end of 1995.

III. REVIEW OF TRAVEL AND RELATED ENTITLEMENTS FOR MEMBERS OF ORGANS AND SUBSIDIARY ORGANS AND STAFF MEMBERS OF THE UNITED NATIONS

9. In section II, paragraphs 11 to 30, of his report (A/C.5/48/83), the Secretary-General provides a comparative review of travel standards of Member States and travel standards within the United Nations system. The Advisory Committee notes from paragraphs 36 and 37 of the report that the Secretary-General did not propose any revision of the current standards of

accommodation for air travel of staff members of the United Nations; the Secretary-General also suggested that the General Assembly might wish to refer the question of travel of staff of the United Nations common system to the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) for further consideration. Although aware that travel standards are not covered by the common system, the Advisory Committee believes that ICSC can do valuable work in this regard for the consideration of this subject by various legislative organs. The Advisory Committee also points out that United Nations travel will be the subject of a report by the Joint Inspection Unit to be issued in 1995.

10. The report of the Secretary-General on the review of travel and related entitlements for members of organs and subsidiary organs and staff members of the United Nations (A/C.5/48/14) provides an update to his earlier report on this subject (A/C.5/47/61 and Corr.1). Annexes I and II to the later report of the Secretary-General contain an updated list of subsidiary bodies whose members are entitled to payment of travel and subsistence expenses for attendance at meetings. In this connection, the Advisory Committee recalls its conclusion reflected in paragraph 8 of its report contained in document A/46/748, namely, "that outstanding issues remain with regard to removing inconsistencies in the payment of subsistence allowance to members of certain organs and subsidiary bodies". The Committee points out that the inconsistencies have not been removed. The Committee also recalls that the Secretary-General, in paragraph 54 of his earlier report (A/C.5 47/61), made a number of suggestions in order to eliminate anomalies resulting from the current travel provisions.

11. Furthermore, the Secretary-General suggested in paragraph 55 of document A/C.5/47/61 that the General Assembly may wish:

(a) To examine its past decisions on the travel entitlements of representatives of the functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council nominated directly by their Governments;

(b) To provide clarification regarding the travel entitlements of members of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice;

(c) To address the issue of exceptional travel assistance to representatives from the least developed and other developing countries.

12. In paragraph 9 of document A/C.5/48/14, the Secretary-General also requested the General Assembly to consider at its forty-eighth session the question of the payment of travel expenses to the representatives in the Commission on Sustainable Development.

13. The Committee recalls that it had recommended that any decision of the General Assembly to extend the principle of limiting reimbursement of travel costs to representatives from least developed countries attending sessions of the General Assembly to the subsidiary organs of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council should apply only to bodies whose members participated as representatives of their Governments. 2/ The Advisory Committee reiterates its recommendation.

IV. STANDARDS OF ACCOMMODATION FOR AIR TRAVEL

14. Pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 44/442 of 21 December 1989, 45/248 A, section XIII, of 21 December 1990 and 45/450 of 20 December 1991, the report of the Secretary-General on standards of accommodation for air travel (A/C.5/48/3) covers the period from 1 July 1992 to 30 June 1993 and contains information on all expenditures by the United Nations for first-class air travel and on the meetings attended by eminent persons for whom exceptions have been made for first-class air travel.

15. Tables 2 and 3 of the Secretary-General's report summarize, by category of exception, the number of exceptions granted during the current and previous reporting periods, respectively; as noted in paragraph 10 of the report, "there has been a significant decrease in the total number of exceptions authorized, as well as in the additional cost involved". During the period under review, i.e. from 1 July 1992 to 30 June 1993, the Secretary-General authorized 66 cases of first-class travel and 69 cases of business-class travel as exceptions to the standards of accommodation; the total additional costs incurred as a result of these exceptions amounted to $149,553, which compares to a figure of $201,373 for the previous reporting period.

16. The Advisory Committee welcomes the reduction in the overall number of exceptions and their total costs during the period from 1 July 1992 to 30 June 1993, although it notes that the number of exceptions for travel by business class has increased during the same period from 58 to 69 and the related costs of such exceptions also increased from $34,566 to $37,556. The Committee was provided, upon request, with the following update summary of requests for exceptions to the standards of accommodation for air travel for the period from 1 July 1991 to 30 June 1994:

	1991-1992	1992-1993	1993-1994 a/
First class			
Approved	114	68	33
Not approved	2	2	5
Withdrawn	4	0	1
Subtotal	120	70	39
Business class			
Approved	58	75	56
Not approved	1	4	8
Withdrawn	8	0	2
Subtotal	67	79	66

	1991-1992	1992-1993	1993-1994 a/
Combined totals			
Approved	172	143	89
Not approved	3	6	13
Withdrawn	12	0	3
Total	187	149	105

a/ Does not include adjustments for ex post facto authorizations.

As can be seen from the table, the number of exceptions for first-class travel has decreased, exceptions for business-class travel decreased during 1993-1994 but remained essentially at the level of 1991-1992, although the number of requests not approved in this category has risen from one in 1991-1992 to four in 1992-1993 and to eight during 1993-1994. The Committee notes that the 1993-1994 data do not include ex post facto authorizations. The Advisory Committee finds no convincing justification for granting ex post facto exceptions and it recommends, therefore, that this practice be terminated.

17. The Committee notes from table 2 of document A/C.5/48/3 that, during the period from 1 July 1992 to 30 June 1995 about a half (64) of the total number of exceptions (135) were authorized for eminent persons. The Committee's review of the list of eminent persons in annex III to document A/C.5/48/3 demonstrated the need for clear criteria to determine the level of "eminency" of travellers. The Committee believes that criteria should be applied to individuals rather than groups.

18. The Advisory Committee also recalls that it had recommended that the standards of accommodation, as set forth in General Assembly resolution 42/214, should be brought to the attention of all eminent persons whose travel was financed by the Organization and it had also expressed the view that, while not opposed in principle to the granting of exceptions, the Committee trusted that they would be granted carefully and selectively. The Committee reiterates its above recommendation.

19. With regard to exceptions on grounds of medical condition or advanced age, the Committee recommends that efforts be made to reduce further the number of such exceptions, since, first of all, only in very exceptional cases, in the view of the Committee, should people with an aggravated medical condition be required to work and/or to travel; in this case, the basis for upgrading either to business or to first class is not clear to the Committee. Secondly, advanced age per se cannot be considered as a sufficient reason for authorizing exceptions; the Advisory Committee notes, in this connection, that currently there is no threshold for granting exceptions on the basis of age.

20. Furthermore, the Committee believes that there is room for improvement in the planning of travel, which could lead to a reduction in exceptions due to

unavailability of the regular standard of travel accommodation. The Committee is not convinced that such regular standards were not available on many itineraries listed in annex II to document A/C.5/48/3, and particularly on such itineraries as Amman/London, Amman/Geneva, New York/Mexico City and Geneva/New York. The Committee recommends, therefore, that the number of exceptions due to unavailability of regular standards of air travel be further substantially reduced, especially on well-established international itineraries.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-ninth Session, Supplement No. 5 (A/49/5).

2/ Ibid., Forty-third Session, Supplement No. 7 (A/43/7/Add.8), para. 8.